

Metaphors in Playback Theatre – Bringing it to the right brain

“Everything is a metaphor for everything else” Gregory Bateson

When we tell stories we use symbols. All symbols are potential resources. They are usually just latent resource, waiting to become an overt resource (Lawley & Tompkins (2000). With this mindset, symbols and metaphors are a meaningful expression for both the teller and the audience. Metaphors have always been rich resources for Playback theater actors (Salas, 1999). Over the years, I have been observing the use of metaphors as an actor and conductor, which led me to define and refine the use of such wonderful reserves in a more conscious and precise form. This article will describe the definitions and applications of metaphors in Playback Theatre (PT).

What are metaphors?

Before we apply metaphors, let us first clarify the difference between simile and a metaphor. A simile compares two phenomena “Lila is like a spy”. This is based on isomorphism, similarity of form, shape or structure (Diltz & DeLozier, 2000). There are two kinds of similes: open and closed. A closed simile explains the commonality between the two phenomena (Lila is like a spy because she’s always sneaking up on people). An open simile doesn’t explain explicitly the similarity (Galit is like the wind). Generally, I have found that using open similes challenges the right brain to make the connection between the phenomena and therefore invites more interpretations and meanings to be generated.

Metaphor is an analogy from one semantic field to another, without the phrase “like” or “as”. The metaphor is way to understand and experience one thing in terms of another. The new combination gives new meaning to the original phenomenon. For example, “my friend Joe is a fox.” it is not clear to the listener why Joe is a fox. Because he is fast? Smart? Dangerous? Metaphors are comprised of a number of interrelating components called symbols. No matter how much a symbol (or metaphor) is described, its full meaning remains elusive (Laura is the river that runs wild between the two mountains). Metaphor captures the intangible relationships and patterns in a phenomenon. It is similar to the original experience in the core pattern or feel and an active way in which we understand the world.

There are two types of metaphors: shallow metaphor and deep metaphors (Diltz & DeLozier, 2000, pg. 750). *Shallow metaphors* have obvious similar surface structure with the original phenomenon called *Isomorphism*. It is much like a simile, sometimes using the word like (sleeping like a baby). It is less deep and more common, and serves to soften the

perception of reality.

Deep metaphors relate to the similarity in the core process, shape or relationships that is called *homomorphism*. These metaphors are obliquely related to the original phenomenon and demand a more abstract understanding. In these metaphors the similarity is not as obvious or visible. It is implicitly felt, rather than explicitly observed as we can experience in dreams and cultural myths. These metaphors are more trance inducing, less clear, and usually speak to the unconscious. They relate to the deep structure (deep core truth/pattern) and transfer it to a different deep structure. For example “men are grass”: both share common fundamental processes of growth and death.

In PT and when doing process work with people, I believe that it is best to try to generate deep metaphors that activate both parts of the brain and invigorate creative thinking. My friend and PT colleague Avi Reuveni¹ says that a metaphor “is anything that is not part of the concrete story”. The moment we enter that metaphor, we are already expanding the original story that was said, which can add some space and distance, which can invite multiple interpretations and associations to arrive.

Metaphor landscape

A key concept when working with metaphors is the concept of the *metaphor landscape* (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). All metaphors coexist and interrelate in a consistent and meaningful way within a larger context. The total gestalt of their symbolic perceptions is called the metaphor landscape. In my work in therapy, art or education, I try to physicalize, verbalize or embody the metaphor landscape of the client.

Natural connection

Our brain is wired to make connection between symbols. What is common to a toaster and socks? They both generate and maintain heat, they both engulf something, they both are located at home, and they both excel during the winter and so on...

Using metaphor usually ignites the (right) brain to think. Its symbolic nature activates our right hemisphere, which can play with it, visualize it and expand it. And the verbalization of the metaphor requires the left-brain to make the connections and then find the words to describe it. Therefore such metaphors are activating both parts of the brain for everyone involved, thereby creating a visceral, body-mind experience.

Metaphor classification

Lawley & Tompkins (2000, pg. 10) offer a useful taxonomy of metaphors, which I have found useful when working with clients.

¹ Personal communication, 2016.

1. Verbal

1. **Overt** – phrases, metaphors.
2. **Embedded** – phrases or sayings that are somewhat symbolic (I felt trapped, I see what you mean, the deadline is coming at me). All these phrases assume that there is another process.

2. Non-verbal

1. **Body expression** – body posture, facial expressions, limbic movement, look.
2. **Sounds** – breathing, cough, sighs, and different sounds.
3. **Material** – Ornaments, nature, colors, shapes.
4. **Imaginative** – thought, smells, feelings, pictures.

In PT, I usually work with verbal and non-verbal metaphors.

Non-verbal metaphors

When people are speaking, their body “speaks their mind”. Non-verbal behaviors show how and where they are thinking and feelings. It is therefore recommended to use peripheral vision² to notice any subtle non-verbal communication that the tellers are demonstrating so that the actors can then physicalize or verbalize in order to expand and enrich the metaphor landscape.

PT actors can serve the teller and audience by verbalizing the teller’s non-verbal metaphors. They could also physicalize the teller’s verbal metaphors by intentionally creating a physical symbolic representation (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). Actors can even use their body to mime, act or dance the verbal metaphor.

A note of warning not to directly verbalizes a client’s involuntary tics because that might insult them. That said, enacting unconscious or semiconscious mimics or movements of the client, can give them and audience a new vista into previously unexplored landscapes.

Which metaphors to Use?

Overall, I have found three different ways to use metaphors in PT: clean language, internal fountain or metaphor remix.

a. Clean language

The first approach of “clean language” as described in Lawley and Tompkins (2000) focuses on solely using the teller’s metaphors without ‘contaminating’ it with the actor’s own metaphors. At the base of this approach is to help the client convert their story to

² For more on peripheral vision (in Chorus work) see Romanelli, 2017. The article can be downloaded here.

symbolic form. For example *“And that (teller’s phrase or words) is like what?”* This question enables the inexpressible or abstract to be expressed as a vivid metaphor.

This approach emphasizes the teller’s internal world and our job is just to reflect it back to them so they can hear their own words, examine their perception and discover new associations with other perceptions. When working with clean language, actors should aim to use clients’ exact phrases, expressions or statements. They can repeat that phrase, linger in it and then see what evolves verbally or physically.

“The primary purpose of Symbolic Modeling is to facilitate an individual to learn about the organization of their metaphors. In the process of becoming aware of the way their system works, conditions emerge in which change is a natural consequence. Change does not occur in a vacuum – it requires a context, a Metaphor Landscape. Once the context exists, simply using Clean Language within the logic of the client’s metaphors and faithfully following the process as it unfolds, normally activates the change process.” (Pg. 48).

This approach recommends not to analyze or interpret metaphors, but to simply reflect it back to the client, thereby giving the opportunity to become aware of their symbolic perceptions with minimal ‘pollution’ from the actor’s metaphors.

b. Internal fountain

The other approach for working with metaphors is to use your own personal imagination. Carl Whitaker, the famous family therapist, embodies this approach. He writes about families, but you can change the word family with tellers:

“When meeting with a family, any ideas, thoughts, or associations that break into my consciousness belong to them as much as to me. It’s the combined therapist-family superset that arouses these notions or images. As such, it seems only appropriate to consider sharing them with the family. Of course my awareness of these associations is tied to how well I know myself. To how free I am to tune in to my own internal processes.” (Whitaker & Bumberry, 1988, pg. 42).

This approach enables actors to introduce and infuse the enactment with their own spontaneous metaphors that emerged when they were hearing the story or on stage. Teller and audience will be able judge for themselves whether the new metaphors introduced are helpful or not, and are free to reject or change them, since they are not their own original metaphors. Moreover, these new metaphors can challenge, change or reshape their existing metaphor landscape to a new one, generating movement, vitality and change.

c. Metaphor Remix

In the metaphor remix approach (Keeney, 2010; Keeney & Keeney, 2013), the purpose of the metaphor is to generate different kinds of metaphors and keep the conversation inside a creative, exploratory context. Therefore, the actor should collect the client's different metaphors and remix them in a free-associative way "do not worry about making sense; the purpose here is to evoke and invoke creative difference." (Keeney & Keeney, 2013, pg. 114)

For example, a teller shares a story about her marriage and uses the following metaphors: quick sand, wild, on fire, two separate worlds, and ocean. The actors can take this list and connects them in a free-associative way, saying or enacting something like: "our marriage is like two worlds on fire. Our son is the wild wind that blows quick sand in an attempt to blow out the fire but ends up in the sea."

I've found that all three approaches are beneficial in different situations. When working with very concrete people who find it difficult to use their imaginations, using my internal well brings vitality and novelty to the encounter. When working with people who easily access their imagination and associations, I prefer to use clean language. I use the metaphor remix with tellers or groups that have a strong rapport and there is a strong sense of safety and play.

In all approaches, I find it is important to anchor the metaphor in the content of the teller. *Anchoring*³ is the process of incorporating certain details from the original phenomenon (real names, location, objects) within a metaphor. Anchoring is a "scaffold" on which a deep metaphor can lay in, which in turn also helps the teller and audience to digest and internalize the metaphor.

How to enact Metaphors?

There are three ways to enact (or embody) metaphors when working with people:

1. Verbalizing it fully and directly – this is the most common use of metaphors. The actor describes the metaphor in their dialogue explicitly.
2. Verbal mentioning – The actor uses the metaphor more indirectly using analogy, play on words, songs or incorporating symbols from the metaphor.
3. Embodying the metaphor physically through movement and non-verbal behavior.

³ Avi Reuveni, personal communication, 2016.

Tips for metaphor work with tellers

- Less is more. When bringing your original personal metaphor onstage, best to keep it somewhat vague, so the teller and audience can project onto it more freely.
- Don't commit yourself to one elaborate, specific metaphor. That might lead you away from the core, archetypal heart of the story⁴.
- Best to extend and expand the metaphor landscape of the teller, through physicalizing and developing the outskirts of the metaphor. Help the teller and audience see what is beyond the original metaphor that was described in the story. Try to take the metaphor and play with its meaning, direction or context in the here-and-now of the enactment.
- Do not forget the archetypal dimension in the story, even when in metaphor.
- Best to use the metaphor sparsely in Scenes.

In short forms

- Take a metaphor from teller/yourself.
- Use it as a way into the metaphor landscape– fully or partially.
- When expanding the landscape, infuse the heart of the story/archetypal level/anchor from the story.

In long forms

- Take a metaphor from teller/yourself
- Recognize the archetypal level and the emotional journey.
- Best if the Teller's actor (TA) enacts the emotional journey of the teller and the ninja actors (Romanelli, 2013) hold the metaphor landscape.
 - TA should play the emotional truth onstage through maintaining eye contact with the ninjas actors throughout.
- Ninja actors can enact the metaphor landscape through vague offers.
- It is also possible that TA embodies the metaphor and ninja actors hold the anchor to the original story.

⁴ The archetypal level of the story is the core, universal dimension found in every story. See more on the levels of the story in Romanelli (2016) "Dilemmas and conflicts in PT". The article can be downloaded here.

Metaphor Exercises

Below are some exercises we have developed over the years that help actors recognize and generate metaphors.

“Men/Women are like...”⁵

“Your unconscious mind will work out a meaning that fits for you. A metaphor respects your ability to lean what you need from what it offers. This is why it is not the custom to explain the meaning of a metaphor.” (Knight, 2002. pg. 130)

This game relates to the idea that complex metaphors make sense in different ways to different people. It also gives confidence in actors to generate metaphors by experiencing the mind’s wonderful ability to connect and find meaning between different phenomena.

- Pairs are walking around.
- One starts “men are like ____ (anything s/he notices in the room)” then the partner intuitively completes the sentence.
- Then the first person honestly validates and says “wow, that’s deep”.
 - *For example, (Person A) men are like... (Person A spots a pair of shoes in the corner of the room)... shoes!*
 - *(Person B intuitively answers) In the beginning they are hard, and then they slowly get softer.*
 - *(Person A) wow, that’s deep!*
- Then pair can choose any topic/theme/concept instead of men/women (love is like a door handle... children are like a window... oppression is like candy...).
- Another variation – the same as before but this time person A, instead of only validating the metaphor that Person B created, s/he uses intellectual thinking⁶ and gives his or her personal meaning to the metaphor generated.
 - In our previous example, person A can say “yes, that is true because when I first talked to my husband, he never would share his feelings, and now he loves telling me how much he loves our kids...”

The Pun game

This exercise allows actors to practice different ways to infuse their scenes with metaphors.

⁵ I recently found a similar exercise in Diltz and deLozier, 2000, pg. 751.

⁶ For more on intellectual thinking see Romanelli (2016) on the 3 dimensional model for Scenes. The article can be downloaded here.

- Pairs choose a scene and are given a category/theme/metaphor
- They start improvising a scene and each actor tries to incorporate the theme in different ways within the scene. They can use word play, physical gestures of the theme or any way that can allude to the metaphor.

Free associations and reincorporation (Five Images)

This game is by Alan Marriott (2009, pg. 115). This game helps actors gain confidence in connecting different symbols in order to create and expand the metaphor landscape.

- In pairs, one person gives 5 emotion-evoking images/symbols. For example: *a burning building, a dog stuck in a box, a pregnant women in pain, a green apple, Canada.*
- The partner then starts telling a story using each of the images, using their intuitive thinking (Marriott, 2009) together with movement. The actor tries to reincorporate all the symbols into one metaphor landscape.
 - In our example: IN Canada, a building was on fire. On the top floor lived a pregnant women and her dog. As the flames started reaching into their apartment, the dog ran toward the door and got stuck in a big cardboard box that was left open, lying on it's side. The pregnant women tried to run out of the apartment but slipped on a green apple that fell from the box the dog was stuck in....
- The partner tracks to make sure all the images were incorporated.

We have found that when physicalizing each image (which is actually a symbol), intuitive thinking is more easily activated which leads to an organic synergistic journey through these images.

Reaction formation – Inspired by Lyubotov (2015)

This exercise allows actors to notice and use non-verbal metaphors. This could also be a PT form for stories that include trauma, or that are “stuck” in the teller’s body.

- In pairs. Teller tells a story.
- Actor notices what non-verbal behaviors the teller exhibited while telling their story.
- The actor starts embodying and enlarging these non-verbal behaviors, allowing them to organically develop or deepen.
- S/he can also speak or sing sporadically if needed.

Metaphoric landscape in space and action – inspired by Avi Reuveni

This exercise helps ensembles use group mind in order to build and inspire each other to develop the metaphor landscape.

- 5–8 actors in a circle.
- One person gives a metaphor for how they are feeling now.
- One by one people enter the circle and sculpt themselves as parts of this landscape while verbalizing who or what they are.
 - *For example, Lena shares that she feels like a tourist.*
 - *Tzach enters the circle and poses as a store vendor and says, “I’m the seller that is trying to rip you off”.*
 - *Lila enters as a suitcase and says, “I’m the suitcase that is following you blindly and notices that you don’t know where you are going”.*
 - *Amitai enters as the tour guide “I’m the tour guide that has seen dozens of tourists like you and feels empathy toward you”.*
 - And so forth...
- A variation – Each actor] that enters, after identifying themselves as a character or object, continues to talk to the teller and a short dialogue emerges.

Finding physical isomorphism toward a new landscape

This exercise invites actors to incorporate both clean language as well as using their internal fountain of metaphors.

- In pairs, a teller tells a story.
- Actor imitates and embodies a body posture or non-verbal behavior from the teller.
- He lingers in that embodiment and notices in what landscape or context does that gestalt/posture fit?
- Once the landscape is chosen, the actor continues to develop and explore the landscape.
 - *For example, the teller is hunched over when telling her story.*
 - *The actor hunches over and breathes into that posture.*
 - *She then starts intuitively feeling like she is climbing up a mountain with a heavy bag.*

- *She starts a monologue about climbing a mountain and anchors elements of the client's original story...*

In closing, I hope that these concepts encourage actors and ensembles to look out for verbal and non-verbal metaphors and dare to embody them while expanding the metaphor landscape. Some might fear that using metaphors are foolish or not as “serious” as the reality of the story. I believe that if we honestly commit to the client (or our own) metaphors, then some movement or inspiration will arrive.

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